

OCTOBER 16, 1986

The Shortgrass Country started coming under woven wire fence before World War One. Up as late as the 1930s a few of the grey bearded cowhands knew where drift fences had been strung before the end of the last century.

My Uncle Goat Whiskers kept up with such matters for my family. Whiskers spent a lot of his time sitting in a living room chair with his high topped boots resting on a foot stool, reading and studying ponderous books and journals. While the rest of us were preoccupied with serious pursuits like running old mares and their colts and charging off afoot with a shotgun after blue quail, Uncle Whiskers developed and retained a keen sense for the history and bearings of the land.

The reason that is important today is because the grassland has completed a cycle and is once again as good as it was before fencing and ranching came to the country. Summer rains followed by bountiful fall moisture has put us in the unusual position of having more grass than cattle or sheep. For those who have wondered how the land looked when man first made his long trek from the Bering Strait to the south, now is as close as I think it will ever come to being that perfect.

I suppose that back then the land did have faults. The Indians' pet name for the region was "Short Layover." I certainly respect their judgment. The tribes, as you may have noticed in reading their histories, didn't lose their buffalo from big feed bills and bigger interest payments. Their problem was bad foreign relations and weak defense program. White-eyed horse soldiers and long range rifles put them out of business. Whoever it was that invented iron-rimmed wagon wheels and created a land trade agreement with a clause for a reservation blew their way of life to pieces.

Other than the cows that were killed under the government program during the Big Depression of the '30s, I can't remember us losing any cattle from gunshots like the Indians did. Our skirmishes with the *federales* have been subtle little spats like the difference of a few hundred thousand on the value of dry grazing land for estate tax purposes, or maybe a trifling suit over a tax return.

Ranchers have a better deal than the Indians do, I think. We can't sell handcrafted jewelry to tourists, but we are free to make all the rawhide we want and run trap lines and have a home garden without making any extra tax renditions. We certainly aren't third class citizens, but I think we will advance that much some day. Given time we may make a deep mark on our country.

Too bad that Uncle Goat Whiskers isn't around to record the summer and fall of 1986. Some folks are worried about being under stocked. If they'll be patient, nature will solve that problem.